

Looking after a special group



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If the average Australian worker is feeling the strain as the sands of industrial relations shift under our feet, how much greater is the stress for those from less typical backgrounds? Much valid concern has been expressed lately about the effects of new employment policies on women, young people, the low-paid and those in service industries. Migrant workers and those from a non-English speaking background, however, are a discrete labour group which receives relatively little attention when the dangers of decentralised bargaining are chronicled.

Yet they are among the most vulnerable members of the Australian workforce. In the Federal Race Discrimination Commissioner's *State of the nation — a report on people of non-English speaking backgrounds*, specific concerns were expressed about the impact of decentralised bargaining on these employees. They were seen as having much less knowledge of industrial relations processes than workers from English-speaking backgrounds. Relatively poor English skills were identified as a major impediment to effective consultation in the workplace.

These shortcomings were considered likely to threaten real participation by migrant workers in enterprise-based negotiations. Moreover, a recent Department of Industrial Relations study found that even where agreements had been finalised, a lack of English comprehension was limiting full implementation of many so-called best practice initiatives contained in them.

There are some suggestions that these basic problems are made worse by the attitude of both unions and management. The *Australian Non-English Speaking Background Women's Association* (ANESBWA), for example, argues that effective use of consultative committees for these workers is often restricted when organisations bypass them with the union's agreement, because bargaining is considered to be beyond the language skills of committee members. To make things worse, unions are often not well acquainted with the problems of this group because members tend to be less actively involved than English speaking workers. For this reason, ANESBWA has proposed a formal charter of workers' rights to a minimum bargaining capacity, achieved through guarantees of access to training and provision of information about enterprise bargaining. Other groups have suggested establishment of centres — similar to working women's centres — as resource facilities for workers of non-English speaking background.

With such tangible barriers confronting them, it is no surprise that workers in this group are finding the going hard under an enterprise-focussed régime. Many enter it from a disadvantaged position to begin with. They are heavily concentrated in the secondary or peripheral labour market in poorly-paid jobs. Many are to be found in declining industry sectors such as textiles and clothing. But others can be found in a wide range of organisations across the full industry spectrum. Some are certainly in libraries. Wherever located, they have in common the simple fact that, in a climate increasingly based on industrial trade-offs, few have much to bargain with. This no doubt is why a policy paper by researchers Alcorso and Hage (*Bargained away? Enterprise bargaining and non-English speaking background women workers*) articulates and justifies the widespread fear that these people are giving up far more than they gain in enterprise agreements.

The research finds that there are some potential benefits from decentralised bargaining. Indeed, a minority of these workers in the metal industry do seem to have made gains in above average wage increases, better training opportunities and more flexible working patterns. But for the majority, unfortunately, this is not the case. Perhaps one of the greatest disappointments is the tiny number of enterprise agreements which have included language and literacy training initiatives, even though this has been identified as fertile ground for mutual employer-worker benefit, through improvements in productivity for the organisation with simultaneous equity gains for the workforce.

Much can be done in this area, as shown at Curtin University in Perth, for example. There, the University's *General staff award restructuring and enterprise agreement* includes a paid leave for English language training clause. This provides leave during normal working hours for attendance at language classes by staff who cannot meet prescribed standards of communication in English. They may qualify if their lack of skills is impeding career prospects, causing safety risks or damaging productivity outcomes.

Policies such as this obviously have great potential for improving work performance, to say nothing of the encouragement they clearly provide to a work group not used to sympathetic assistance at work. It is a pity that so many employers lack foresight to adopt them. For another distinct cultural group — Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders — the problem is somewhat different. For them, the clear imperatives are reductions in unemployment levels and achievement of award coverage for

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workers in Government-funded community organisations. ALIA is striving to play its part in increasing employment opportunities through its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recruitment and career development strategy discussed elsewhere in this edition.

But enterprise bargaining is already an emerging issue for this group, too. And here it is encouraging to note that some organisations do seem to have taken promising steps to include new employment conditions of special importance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers. The Health Insurance Commission, for example, has introduced new ceremonial leave provisions; enhanced bereavement leave has been granted in some agencies to recognise the extended kinship sys-

tems of indigenous people; and the *ERA environmental services enterprise agreement* provides for employee training in Aboriginal traditions, language and customs.

These are very positive developments, not just for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, but for enterprise bargaining generally. They are tangible demonstrations of how the new system *occasionally* is proving to be just what its rhetoric claims: that is, a process which offers flexibility and advantage for both employers and their workers. The tragedy to date is the significance of the word 'occasionally'. When it is replaced by 'usually', perhaps enterprise bargaining will have a chance of realising the high hopes of its many advocates in both government and industry. ■

*ALIA is striving to
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its Aboriginal and
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